

Steve Silverman Remarks at Brown v. Board of Education 50th
Anniversary
Silver Spring May 13, 2004

On May 17, 1954, this nation turned an important corner.

From the start, our United States of America were born, if you will, in “original sin.” The sin was slavery, an institution which vexed our Founding Fathers, many of whom opposed the institution but also recognized that, without some compromise on the question, there might not be a United States. Many assumed it would simply evolve out of existence. That did not happen.

Because of a failure of politicians over an 80-year period to wrestle this issue to the ground and do the right thing, 600,000 young men died in a war that pitted brother against brother, neighbor against neighbor.

When the smoke cleared, the institution of slavery was dead. But the absence of slavery did not mean the advent of equality for Black Americans. The deck was still stacked against the ability of Black Americans – North and South – to build a better life for themselves and their families.

The new shackles were social and economic and political. They were also legal. The highest court of our land, in Plessy v. Ferguson, declared that segregated schools were just fine – so long as the schools were “separate, but equal.”

This cruel hoax, this willful dishonesty lasted 58 years – until the Supreme Court turned the corner and – really for the first time since Reconstruction -- put the power of the United States government behind the Black struggle for equality of education and equality of opportunity.

Was it a turning point? Yes. Did it settle the question for all time? Of course not.

I'm reminded of what Winston Churchill said after the Battle of Britain, when Royal Air Force planes turned back the Nazi air armada -- "This isn't the end. It's not even the beginning of the end. But perhaps it's the end of the beginning."

Brown v. Board of Education was perhaps the "end of our beginning." Equality under law is one thing. Translating that legal reality into effective equality in 21st century America is more difficult. We have come a long, long way – and Brown v. Board of Education raised expectations that carried over into the right to vote, to fair housing, to equality in employment and more.

Still, barriers remain – barriers that are perhaps harder to vault over for being more nuanced, more intractable, more interrelated with other ills.

Brown opened the door, providing equal opportunity to the same school systems for millions of schoolchildren. But we have to make sure that all kids who walk through that door have an equal opportunity to learn.

Closing the minority achievement gap in our schools is the defining Civil Rights issue for the 21st century. It is our Brown decision. – not a legal issue, but rather a moral one.

Our County, our state, our nation are poorer when kids get left behind and cannot realize their dreams, fulfill their potential, and contribute to their community.

We will be judged on our efforts to close that gap just as public officials who came before were judged by their positions on

discrimination, in schools, housing, voting, and employment. And that is as it should be.

As a nation, we can never adequately make whole those men and women who could not reach their God-given potential because they were saddled with separate and unequal schools.

What we can do is follow the sage advice of the old spiritual -- and keep our eyes on the prize.

In a society that too easily forgets where it has been and too quickly takes progress for granted, we must do neither. We stand on the shoulders of the giants -- and yes, the ordinary folks -- who have gone before. They are counting on us to carry this struggle forward. We dare not disappoint them.

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